

DPH Announces Two More Flu-Related Deaths, Urges Delawareans To Increase Prevention Measures

DOVER – Influenza continues to significantly impact Delaware for the 216-2017 flu season. The Division of Public Health (DPH) announced today the fourth and fifth flu-related fatalities in Delaware for the current season, as well as a continued sharp increase in cases for those ages 0 – 24.

Both of the deceased individuals were elderly, and had multiple underlying health conditions in addition to being infected with influenza. The first week of February, an 86-year-old Kent County man, residing in a nursing home, passed away after being transported to the hospital. Last week, a 90-year-old New Castle County man who lived at home passed away. He had also been transported to the hospital as a result of his illness. Both men were infected with Influenza A.

The number of lab-confirmed flu cases this season is significantly higher than last year at this time. As of the week ending Feb. 11, there have been 1,296 lab-confirmed cases in Delaware with 263 requiring hospitalization. In comparison, at the same time last year, there were 58 lab-confirmed flu cases statewide with 10 requiring hospitalization. The 2015-2016 season saw an unusually late peak in flu activity, which generally occurs between December and February. The first flu-related death in Delaware for the 2015-2016 season occurred on March 14, 2016.

Of the 1,296 cases, 772 infected individuals are from New Castle County, 321 from Kent County, and 203 from Sussex County. These numbers reflect lab-confirmed cases and the

actual number of flu cases in Delaware is likely much higher.

Of the lab-confirmed cases, 224 individuals are 65 years of age or older. Of the 263 individuals hospitalized so far this flu season, 142 (54 percent) have been 65 or older. While it affects those of all ages, the flu virus is more likely to cause fatalities in the elderly. All five victims who have died from flu-related illnesses this season were elderly individuals (65 years old or older) with underlying health conditions.

Persons in the 0 to 24-year-old age group are also being hit particularly hard this flu season. Of the season's lab-confirmed flu cases, 704 are in this age group or 54 percent of all cases.

"This year's flu numbers reinforce the unpredictability of influenza," said Department of Health and Social Services Secretary Dr. Kara Odom Walker. "Given that we see such wide variation almost every year, taking all the steps to prevent the flu is vital. Getting vaccinated, washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill can protect you and your loved ones."

DPH is still advising that persons with emerging flu symptoms should call – not visit – their medical providers, who may be able to prescribe anti-viral medication. Flu symptoms can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue.

"Flu is not a disease to be taken lightly," said DPH Director Dr. Karyl Rattay. "If someone has underlying health conditions, is pregnant or has a young child at home who is ill, call your doctor immediately if you have flu-like symptoms."

DPH recommends these actions to protect seniors and vulnerable populations, including the very young, pregnant women, and those who recently gave birth, and people with underlying

medical conditions, such as lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, and individuals with weak immune systems:

- If you are receiving treatment in a long-term care facility or in-home care, ask if the staff is vaccinated against the flu and, if not, the staff person should wear a mask at all times.
- Visits at home or in a facility should be limited if the visitor is under age 16, or has the flu or is at risk of exposure to the flu. The illness can be transmitted prior to someone showing symptoms.
- If you are living with a senior and a family member contracts the flu, keep the two separate as much as possible and ensure everyone in the home follows sanitary precautions.
- Wash hands frequently with soap or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, especially after you cough, sneeze, or touch your face.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and dispose of the tissue immediately. If a tissue is not available, cough or sneeze into your inner elbow. Droplets from a sneeze can travel up to six feet.
- Stay home when sick and do not return to work or school until 24 hours after a fever is gone.
- Ensure all your loved ones are vaccinated against the illness. While this year's vaccine may offer limited protection against one of the flu strains, it does protect well against the other two to three strains of flu. In addition, the vaccination can help make the illness milder and prevent the illnesses due to the other strains circulating in the community. Vaccines are available from DPH clinics, physicians, pharmacies, and many grocery stores.

Public Health officials encourage anyone, 6 months of age and older, who has not yet been vaccinated against the flu to do so as soon as possible. DPH continues to offer the vaccine at

four State Service Centers. Information for these sites can be found at <http://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/fluclinics.html>.

For more information on influenza prevention, diagnosis and treatment, call the Division of Public Health at 800-282-8672 or visit flu.delaware.gov.

A person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind or speech-disabled can call the DPH phone number above by using TTY services. Dial 7-1-1 or 800-232-5460 to type your conversation to a relay operator, who reads your conversation to a hearing person at DPH. The relay operator types the hearing person's spoken words back to the TTY user. To learn more about TTY availability in Delaware, visit <http://delawarerelay.com>.

Delaware Health and Social Services is committed to improving the quality of the lives of Delaware's citizens by promoting health and well-being, fostering self-sufficiency, and protecting vulnerable populations. DPH, a division of DHSS, urges Delawareans to make healthier choices with the 5-2-1 Almost None campaign: eat 5 or more fruits and vegetables each day, have no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time each day (includes TV, computer, gaming), get 1 or more hours of physical activity each day, and drink almost no sugary beverages.